UNCCD COP13, Ordos, 7th September, 2017; DNI, ICON SLM and CARI side-event, 6pm – 8pm

Land Degradation Neutrality, some perspectives for action

A full version of the report provided by Mélanie Requier-Desjardins (DNI and ICON SLM Chair)

Side-event AGENDA

LDN, some perspective for action

- **LDN as a multidimensional target**
  - Prof. Pier Paolo Roggero (DNI) – Moderation / Wrap-up
  - Prof. Wang Fei (DNI co-chair) – introduction
  - Dr. Mélanie Requier (DNI, ICON SLM chair) – for a socioeconomics of LDN
  - Feedback from the audience

- **Outcomes from international events**

Global Soil Week workshop on neutrality (Berlin May 2017)

- Dr. Mariam Akhtar Schuster (DNI, co-chair of the UNCCD Science Policy Interface) – the Science Policy Interface perspective

- Nathalie van Haren (BothENDS, CSO observer in the UNCCD Science Policy Interface) – Land Degradation Neutrality, some perspectives for action

- Feedback from the audience

DesertifActions (Strasbourg, June 2017)

- Wafa Essahli (DNI) – Synthesis of the outcomes

- Manon Albagnac (CARI) – Civil society participation to LDN programs

- Feedback from the audience
1. DNI activities at UNCCD COP.13 in Ordos, China

During the 13th Session of the Conference of the Parties to the UNCCD (UNCCD COP.13) in Ordos, China, DNI, ICON-SLM and CARI jointly hosted a side-event on *Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN)*, *some perspectives for action*. The side event took place immediately after the presentation of LDN at the session of the Committee on Science and Technology (CST). Also due to this reason the side event attracted a broad range of stakeholders in the evening hours of 7th September. 45 participants attended the side-event, from various countries and institutions. This success was further supported by the announcement of the official accreditation of ICON SLM to the UNCCD convention.

2. General outcomes

One focus of the side-event was on the discussion about the social and economic aspects of ‘neutrality’. Official presentations in the CST session at COP.13 were dedicated to the associated Sustainable Development Goal 15, and specifically its target15.3 on LDN. The discussions at the side event showed that to date, the neutrality target had mainly been discussed from the bio-physical environmental perspective. The side event of DNI, ICON SLM and CARI helped to broaden this perspective by reflecting on the socio-economic dimensions that need to be considered in order to successfully achieve the LDN target. It was also highlighted that the SDGs should not be seen as asilo. The implementation of activities to achieve the LDN target will certainly benefit numerous other SDGs as well. Its implementation should rather be seen as a benefit multiplier in order to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

3. Details

The Co-chair of DNI, Prof. Wang Fei, opened the side event by welcoming attendants and thanking the partner networks for jointly organising the side event. Prof. Fei underscored the links between SDG 15.3 and the other SDGs, and highlighted the need to see their interconnectedness. In her keynote address, the Chair of DNI, Dr. Mélanie Requier-Desjardins emphasised this approach and outlined the necessity to consider the socio-economic dimensions for the successful operationalisation of LDN in order to support sustainable, transformative development processes at national and sub-national levels. Her presentation also clearly reflected the relationship between achieving LDN, human wellbeing, food security and poverty reduction. This integrated perspective supported discussions at the side event regarding the interlink ages between the LDN process of implementation and ‘valuation’ rather than only focusing on the target per se. Therefore, a major issue to be addressed is how the neutrality target can become a tool for enhancing human well-being and food security, so that e.g. it delivers fair employment and women’s empowerment. Furthermore, there is a need to understand what socio-economic, policy and governance criteria are required to consider LDN as a cooperation process or even as a programme. Implications for policy (institutional context) and research (need for interdisciplinary research funding on SDGs, local food security, site-specific adaptation) were underlined. Due to time constraints, the rich discussions at the side event could not deal with the following relevant aspects in detail:
Regional examples (for instance from Mali) showed that although political stability for investments in LDN was considered important, people's actual needs should be considered whilst addressing both desertification and political instability. For people of the Fiji Islands, land rights are mostly regulated by traditional customs. This could pose a challenge whilst addressing land tenure issues within LDN targeting measures at the national and local levels.

An expert from South Africa stated that socio-economics and also land use differ in the sub-regions of Africa. A national perspective for implementing LDN is therefore indispensable. He further stated that it is unclear how people on the ground can benefit from funds provided for implementing LDN.

A representative from the UNCCD advised on the need to go beyond the aspect of the economics of land degradation (ELD), and to expand on other social aspects as well because the economics of land degradation is already well documented with many cases available.

A representative from Argentina and SPI pointed towards the risk of contradiction between local populations’ actual needs (improved incomes) and the goals of investors (banks, loans), which may naturally be more focused on profits.

DNI expert, Mr. Youssef Brahimi, also Chair of the “Route du sel et de l’espoir” association again emphasised the need to consider social aspects in implementing LDN. He stressed the need to answer questions such as how we can rely on the local community (e.g. integration of and trust-building within communities), and how cooperatives or other structures can optimally considered in mechanisms for LDN implementation. According to Mr Brahimi, measures to achieve LDN are already be ingused in some areas and there is a need to reflect on how to capture these experiences (success stories) when designing projects at local level (e.g. up-scaling successful incentives, disincentives, etc.).

Dr. Mariam Akhtar-Schuster presented the main outcomes of the Global Soil week 2017 (GSW) which gathered 300 experts in an international setting in May 2017 in Berlin, Germany. A major question posed at the GSW 2017 was how to adopt an approach framed by the 2030 agenda based on universality and inclusion (e.g. ‘to leave no one behind’). Responses addressing this question considered exploring the links between LDN, other SDGs and measures to implement sustainable land management (SLM).

The five key messages developed by the participants to GSW17 were presented. Discussions at the side event showed that these key messages converged with the opinions shared by the experts at the side event at COP.13, also providing other relevant aspects from a scientific perspective, summarized as follows: the need for increased investments in SLM and responsible governance to promote LDN as a tool for sustainable production chains; need to enhance spatial planning and territorial approaches; need to consider land tenure issue as both sensitive and central to the achievement of LDN; need to build a bridge between SDG 2 (‘hunger’) and 15 (‘life on land’); and the need to increase the role of scientific networks and targeted research in the implementation of SDGs. In fact,
some SDGs are so complex that the 2030 deadline may not be sufficient. However, as the SDGs are perceived to being aspirational in character, the 2030 deadline was rather considered as a first crucial milestone. Another crucial question is how to improve the acceptance of SDG implementation at national level: this aspect is clearly linked to socio-economic issues, political laws and regulations as well as financing and monitoring aspects.

Four research gaps could be identified at the workshop: (1) the need for integrated and coherent approaches; (2) the need to take the interlinkages between SDGs into consideration; (3) the consideration of national realities in LDN implementation processes; and that (4) national but also global level connections and interdependencies have to be analysed. All countries will experience challenges in implementing their SDGs.

Nathalie van Haren (Both ENDS, CSO observer in the UNCCD Science Policy Interface) gave a comprehensive and extensive presentation on the Voluntary Guidelines for a Responsible Governance of land Tenure (VGGT), as a central tool for LDN implementation. Ms van Haren also emphasised the need to pay attention to transparent and participatory decision making processes to prevent conflicts and ensure many other relevant aspects for LDN implementation in the SPI Conceptual Framework on Land Degradation Neutrality. VGGT is part of the human rights framework and is complementary to other guidelines.

Many comments came from participants following the VGGT presentation:

A representative of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) found the GSW outputs too top-down. A representative of the University of Bern in Switzerland underlined the need to increase investments in SLM and ensure adequate governance to support LDN. The logical query was then on how such investments can be increased. Regarding the situation of smallholders, it was queried whether through LDN we are really talking about inequality.

For the UNCCD representatives attending the DNI, ICON SLM, CARI side event, LDN is clearly interconnected with other SDGs. Concerns were raised that as many organisations are responsible for the same SDGs, different organisations could be competing for the implementation of the SDGs instead of ensuring synergies in action (“are we competing or collaborating?”). It was emphasised that the UNCCD should focus on SDG target 15.3 and ensure synergies in actions and for the implementation of this target, particularly because the SDGs are interdependent to greater or lesser degrees.

Finally, the German Development Institute discussed the need to develop recommendations to change consumption patterns in food systems as food production is a major cause of land degradation.

Ms Wafa Essahli, the former chair of DNI, presented the main results of the LDN workshop at Desertif’Actions 2017 (“DA17”, an international summit for non-state actors organized by CARI) in
June 2017. DA17 gathered more than 300 people in Strasbourg, France. Several questions were addressed in the LDN workshop like how to explore the link between the national level and the local level for the successful implementation of LDN activities; and how to use territory-based projects to contribute to LDN. Responses to these questions showed that the implementation of LDN measures needs to address particularly local governance and also national policies that should provide an enabling environment to support local actions. In the implementation of LDN, there is also a crucial need to respect the hierarchy of responses: (1) to avoid, protect land, preventing it from becoming degraded; (2) to mitigate land degradation and (lastly) (3) to reverse land degradation via rehabilitation and restoration measures. The ELD initiative shows that avoiding land degradation in the first place has to be considered the prime goal in achieving and maintaining LDN. (For more details on the response hierarchy see the conceptual framework for LDN, which has been developed by the UNCCD-SPI).

Manon Albagnac (CARI) gave feedback from civil society experiences in studying LDN and participating in its implementation. Civil society platforms which form the Sahel Desertification Network (ReSaD, coordinated by CARI), have been involved in trying to understand what LDN is since the first discussions during UNCCD COP12 in 2015. In Niger and Burkina Faso, LDN target-setting programs have been launched under governmental leadership. The ReSaD platform represents civil society working on LDN implementation processes, and at the same time participates in technical committees along with representatives of ministries and central technical services. However this participation remains mainly symbolic.

Ms Albagnac underscored that civil society recognizes that since 2015, relevant steps have been taken in the LDN process. These include progress in the setting of a baseline for measuring and monitoring land degradation and identifying priority areas for intervention measures. However, CSOs are concerned that LDN does not bring new information, as the causes of degradation are already known, and good practices for land management are already included in numerous national planning activities. Even so, she stated that civil society must continue to take part in the next steps of the process, by supporting measures to identify adequate actions and projects to implement LDN. As National LDN targets are to be set from national scale to local scales, CSOs being key stakeholders at local scale must keep working on that subject, as well as local authorities, who should also be involved. A first step for local authorities could be integrating LDN targets into their Local Development planning. CSOs have extensive experience and expertise on SLM, so they should be involved in large-scale transformative projects, first in designing them, and then as partners for their implementation. CSOs should also be supported to propose methods of action and projects, primarily at local scales.

Another question is how to show and capitalize on civil society actions that contribute to LDN goals. To answer this, we need to define ‘neutrality’, and to capitalize on projects. There is a need for a way to measure contributions to LDN at the implementation level, in the field. In parallel, the CARI Working Group on Desertification (GTD) has conducted a study on LDN involving CSOs on the ground, as well as scientists. Based on interviews and reviews of field projects, the GTD found that defining progress towards LDN cannot be reduced to the UNCCD’s three environmental indicators (land cover/land use, productivity, carbon stocks (above and below ground)). Three essential dimensions
must also be taken into account to define and implement LDN: the population, ecosystems and local conditions.

The study allowed creation of an analysis grid for projects. This grid aims, on the one hand, to identify the contributions of CSO projects to LDN goals, and on the other hand, to identify priorities for project design.

The grid integrates the 3 new dimensions and proposes principles and standards for each of them.

It is still a work in progress, which will be documented in a report that is scheduled to be available at the end of 2017. Several conclusions can be drawn from the work of civil society regarding LDN:

- LDN implementation cannot be done without involving CSOs working at the local level.
- Local scale is pertinent to realize LDN, thus, again emphasising the role of local authorities.

The audience gave some final feedback on the specific importance of local-scale stakeholder involvement in LDN implementation and monitoring processes. The side-event had to close due to external time constraints.

**Side event main outputs**

- LDN implementation requires the links to be addressed between SDG 15.3 and other SDG targets, rather than treating SDGs as if they are in silos: there is a particular need to build a bridge between SDG 2 (‘hunger’) and 15 (‘life on land’),
- LDN implementation requires promoting reflections and propositions on the LDN process of implementation and valuation instead of only focusing on the target per se.
- It needs to be clarified as to how neutrality can become a tool for enhancing human well-being and enhancing/maintaining food security, fair employment and women’s empowerment
- Socio-economic and governance criteria need to be defined in order to consider LDN as a cooperation project
- LDN has to consider land tenure issue as being both sensitive and central to its achievement. The voluntary guidelines for a * Responsible Governance of land Tenure* (VGGT) can therefore be a central tool for LDN implementation.
- LDN implementation implies enhancing spatial planning and territorial approaches: it addresses particularly local governance and territorial scales. There is a crucial need to respect the hierarchy of responses to achieving LDN ((1) avoid land degradation, (2) mitigate land degradation and (3) reverse land degradation (rehabilitation/restoration)).
- LDN implementation cannot be done without involving CSOs working at the local scale. However, also the national scale it is pertinent to realize LDN need to be supported by policies that provide an enabling environment that empowers local authorities.
- CSOs are still under the impression that LDN does not bring new information because the causes of degradation are already known, and good practices for land management are already included in numerous national planning activities.

In order to implement LDN, it is necessary to increase the role of scientific networks and research to ensure that the implementation of SDGs is scientifically sound and thus sustainable.